

## ***Discussed Vet Center, new CBOC***

By JEFF NEWMAN

After hosting a forum on veterans issues at the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home Monday, Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) met with a handful of local officials and advocates to discuss the need for a veterans counseling center in Southern Maryland.

The impromptu meeting, which was not part of the governor's scheduled agenda, came at the request of Connie Walker, a retired Navy captain and veterans advocate.

O'Malley originally arranged the forum, the latest in his "Maryland Forward" series covering a range of policy issues, after Walker spoke about the region's need for a Vet Center at a January meeting of the Tri-County Council of Southern Maryland.

Walker, of Leonardtown, came away "very encouraged" after Monday's meeting, during which O'Malley committed to lobbying the region's federal delegation for a Vet Center, a place where combat veterans and their families can receive counseling services from fellow combat veterans.

Walker was originally disappointed O'Malley had opted for a large forum instead of a small sit-down, but during a Wednesday interview she recognized its significance and was grateful the governor elected to meet afterwards.

"As a forum for veterans and families to make sure Gov. O'Malley and Congressman [Steny] Hoyer hear what they're living with, especially in a rural area every day, I think a forum like that is very important," Walker said.

Former St. Mary's commissioner Tom Mattingly also attended the Monday meeting and said the governor was "very" receptive to getting a Vet Center in Southern Maryland, where the state's highest concentration of veterans live.

There are an estimated 39,400 veterans living in Southern Maryland, 8 percent of the state total, according to figures from the Maryland Department of Planning. Charles and St. Mary's are the only counties where the veteran population exceeds 16 percent of all adults.

Several potential locations for a Vet Center were discussed, including leased storefront, the county's Welcome Center between Route 5 and the veterans home or even the home's current community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC) should a new one be constructed, Mattingly said.

"A lot of those vet centers are in leased space in shopping centers," he said. "We could easily go find a storefront. That's probably the quickest way."

The budget proposed by President Obama includes \$6.3 million for a new 10,000 square-foot CBOC, but Congress has yet to approve it. The money is not earmarked, Mattingly said.

A trailer intended to expand services at the current CBOC should arrive sometime this month or next, he added.

Mattingly expressed confidence that the region will eventually get a Vet Center, pointing to recent visits from several high-ranking officials, including the governor and U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki, who toured the veterans home last August.

"We've definitely brought attention to the needs of veterans down here," Mattingly said. "Everything we talked about the other day, it all comes back to marketing and communication. "

Mattingly also said it was "obvious" during the forum that "the message is still not getting out to the veterans on the street and that's going to be one of the more important things" as veterans

of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts return home.

"We need to be prepared for that and I don't think we are right now, but we're making progress," he said.